Conservatism's authoritarian fetish is ontological, not pathological

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Conservatism is often described, both by its advocates and its critics, as a political orientation committed to limited government, restraint of state power, and respect for inherited institutions. Its authoritarian expressions are therefore frequently treated as aberrations of leadership failure, populist corruption, or desperate reactions to social change. These clichés, however, obscure a deeper and more consistent structural reality. Conservatism's recurring authoritarianism is not a contradiction of its principles, nor a pathological deviation from them. It is an ontological consequence of its core design logic. Conservatism does not primarily seek to make government small. It seeks to make reality manageable. It does so by narrowing the range of what is recognized as legitimate human experience, legitimate social organization, and legitimate future possibility. Authoritarian enforcement emerges not as a betrayal of conservative ideals, but as the necessary mechanism by which a deliberately restricted ontology is maintained under conditions of social and historical change.

To understand conservatism in this way requires abandoning surface-level analyses that focus on rhetoric, electoral strategy, or individual leaders. It requires instead a structural examination of what conservatism is designed to preserve and how it attempts to do so. At its core, conservatism is a coherence-preserving ideology operating under conditions of perceived ontological threat. It begins from the assumption that social order is fragile, human variation is destabilizing, and novelty carries intrinsic risk. Its response to this perceived fragility is not to expand its adaptive capacity, but to reduce its complexity. Conservatism seeks stability not by increasing a society's ability to absorb difference and change, but by narrowing the field of acceptable variation in advance. Conservatism is best understood not as an argument about policy size, but as a project of ontological minimization.

Any attempt to explain conservatism's recurrent authoritarianism must begin not with its stated commitments but with the ontological background conditions it silently presupposes. Conservatism does not advance a formal metaphysics, yet it operates as though certain features of the world were already settled. Chief among these is the assumption that the range of legitimate human forms is naturally limited and that social roles are not merely contingent arrangements but expressions of an underlying order that precedes choice. Difference is therefore not treated as a neutral fact to be negotiated, but as potential deviation from an already complete schema. Social stability is not something to be achieved through ongoing adjustment, but something that exists prior to politics and must be protected from erosion. The conservative imagination thus begins not from openness to what may emerge, but from anxiety over what must not be allowed to proliferate. Ontology is not explored but guarded.

Closely related is a second, often unexamined assumption. Order is fragile while disorder is generative, such that any expansion of possibility is presumed to outpace the system's capacity to absorb it. Change is therefore interpreted not as adaptation but as accumulation of risk. This orientation reverses a common intuition. Where adaptive frameworks treat variation as information and novelty as a resource, conservatism treats both as noise unless already domesticated by tradition. Freedom is not an inherent good but a conditional allowance, acceptable only when exercised within predefined bounds that do not threaten the intelligibility of the whole. Authority appears not as an instrument of domination, but as a necessary corrective to an always destabilizing reality. Once these assumptions are made explicit, the turn toward enforcement no longer appears anomalous. It follows directly from a worldview that treats the world as ontologically complete, human variation as excessive, and stability as something maintained only through continuous boundary defense.

The ontological narrowing implicit in conservatism becomes visible when one examines how conservative thinkers describe the proper relationship between social order and human agency. In Edmund Burke's famous characterization of society as "a partnership not only of the living, but of the dead and the unborn," the emphasis is not merely on continuity but on constraint. His metaphor establishes an ontological priority of inherited structure over

present choice, implying that legitimate forms of life are already circumscribed by obligations that precede individual agency. Innovation is thereby recast not as discovery but as violation, a breaking of an order whose legitimacy does not require contemporary justification. Burke's repeated warnings against "abstract rights" function less as a rejection of abstraction than as a defense of ontological closure. Rights are acceptable only insofar as they are already embedded within existing forms of life. The future is rendered morally accountable to the past, and the space of permissible transformation is narrowed accordingly.

A similar logic appears in Michael Oakeshott's distinction between "civil association" and "enterprise association," often celebrated as a defense of pluralism and non-instrumental governance. However, Oakeshott's insistence that politics should avoid collective purposes rests on a deeper assumption that the range of legitimate purposes is already culturally settled. His preference for tradition as "the pursuit of intimations" presumes that meaningful action can only occur within a bounded symbolic repertoire, one that unfolds through interpretation rather than creation. While Oakeshott rejects overt authoritarian planning, he nonetheless treats attempts to articulate new collective ends as epistemic overreach. The consequence is not openness but foreclosure. Freedom is preserved only so long as it does not generate novel forms of meaning that would require adjustment of the prevailing social order. Politics becomes custodial rather than adaptive, charged with maintaining intelligibility rather than accommodating emergence.

This ontological conservatism is rendered more explicit in the work of Roger Scruton, particularly in his repeated appeals to "belonging," "home," and "oikophilia." Scruton presents these attachments as pre-political sources of meaning that anchor individuals within a shared moral world, but the affective warmth of these concepts obscures their restrictive function. Belonging is framed as a moral good precisely because it limits the range of acceptable identities and affiliations. Those who do not fit within the inherited symbolic landscape are not merely different, but disorienting. Scruton's critique of multiculturalism and sexual dissidence consistently returns to the claim that excessive diversity dissolves the background conditions of trust. What is defended here is not diversity managed through

institutions, but homogeneity preserved through exclusion. Ontological stability is achieved by ensuring that the world remains recognizable, even if that recognizability depends on the suppression of lived difference.

Even in economic conservatism, where freedom is ostensibly paramount, the same ontological assumptions persist. Friedrich Hayek's critique of rational constructivism and his defense of spontaneous order are often read as arguments for openness and decentralization. Hayek's reverence for evolved norms and traditions, though, rests on the assumption that social complexity can only be navigated through rule-following, whose origins exceed conscious understanding. While this insight captures the limits of centralized knowledge, it simultaneously elevates existing orders to quasi-natural status. Deviations from inherited norms are treated as epistemically suspect, not because they have failed, but because they have not been tested by time. The result is a bias toward the already-realized, in which the burden of proof lies entirely on novelty. Freedom is affirmed procedurally while being ontologically constrained; one may act freely, but only within forms whose legitimacy is already settled.

Across these thinkers, a common pattern emerges. Conservatism consistently equates social order with legibility, and legibility with limitation. The world is treated as something that must remain narratable within familiar categories, and political authority is justified insofar as it preserves that narratability. When historical conditions destabilize these categories, through technological change, demographic transformation, or cultural pluralization, the conservative response is not to expand its symbolic framework, but to intensify boundary enforcement. What appears as a defense of tradition, civility, or belonging thus resolves into an ontological project aimed at keeping the world small enough to recognize. Authoritarianism follows not because conservatives secretly desire domination, but because a restricted ontology cannot survive contact with an expanding reality without coercion. The language of conservative thought, taken seriously and read structurally, leads inexorably to this conclusion.

Within this narrow ontology, the common appeal to "small government" functions rhetorically rather than operationally. Historically, conservative movements and regimes do

not minimize control; they redistribute it. State capacity is reduced selectively in domains that expand human possibility, such as welfare, labor protection, public education, or redistributive policy, while it is intensified in domains that enforce ontological conformity, including policing, border control, sexuality, gender norms, family structure, and moral legislation. This pattern is not contingent on culture or era; it recurs across conservative projects with striking regularity. The apparent contradiction between anti-state rhetoric and authoritarian practice dissolves once their true objective is recognized. The aim is not freedom from government, but insulation from ontological expansion.

This logic is visible in the foundational texts of modern conservatism. Edmund Burke's critique of the French Revolution, often mischaracterized as a defense of prudence or incremental reform, was fundamentally an objection to the expansion of the imaginable. Burke feared not state power as such, but the disruption of inherited symbolic and social constraints that limited what political and social life could become. His defense of monarchy, church, and tradition was not grounded in efficiency or justice, but in their function as stabilizing ontological boundaries. These institutions narrowed the space of possible futures, constrained individual and collective experimentation, and thereby preserved social coherence. Burke's anxiety was not chaos in the narrow sense, but excess possibility. The prospect that society might be reorganized according to principles not sanctioned by inheritance.

This concern with limiting possibility rather than minimizing power persists throughout history. Conservatism assumes that social order requires predefined roles, stable hierarchies, and fixed meanings. It treats human difference not as a resource for adaptation, but as a threat to order. Social experimentation is interpreted as suspect, and deviation from established norms as a destabilizing force. For conservatism, the world must be made simpler so that it can be governed predictably. Complexity is not to be managed; it is to be reduced. Apparent conservative distrust of centralized planning coexists comfortably with intense regulation of individual life, because the target of regulation is not systemic behavior but human variance itself. Contradiction disappears once the real objective is identified, containment rather than coordination.

The conservative promise that “government should stay out of your life” therefore does not signify a withdrawal of power, but a transfer of enforcement mechanisms. Normative control is pushed downward into families, churches, employers, local communities, and informal hierarchies. Social conformity is enforced not through bureaucratic administration, but through moral sanction, economic dependence, and localized coercion. This decentralized discipline often proves more intrusive than centralized regulation, precisely because it operates continuously, intimately, and almost invisibly. It polices identity, behavior, and aspiration at the level of everyday life. The result is not freedom, but a diffusion of authoritarian control across social relations.

The Jim Crow South was a stark illustration of this dynamic. The region was characterized by a weak welfare state, minimal labor protections, and limited public services for Black citizens. By conventional metrics, government was “small,” but the ontological regime was rigid and violently enforced. Racial hierarchy functioned as comprehensive control, defining where individuals could live, work, move, speak, and form relationships. Deviation from prescribed roles was met with extrajudicial violence, economic exclusion, and social terror. This was not a failure of conservative principles, nor a departure from them. It was the conservative system functioning exactly as designed, reducing the range of legitimate human existence and enforcing that reduction through decentralized but brutal means.

Because conservatism deliberately narrows legitimate ontology, nonconformity becomes destabilizing by definition. Difference cannot be tolerated as variation; it must be interpreted as deviance. Novelty cannot be explored; it must be moralized as decadence or decay. This is why conservative movements consistently fixate on domains that generate new possibilities of being, such as sexuality, gender, reproduction, education, art, and language. These are not peripheral culture-war distractions. They are central battlegrounds in any ontological struggle. Control over these domains determines whether societies remain symbolically closed or expand into new forms of life.

Tradition plays a crucial role in this process, functioning less as a historical record than as a compression algorithm. Conservatism treats tradition as a repository of timeless truths, but in practice it operates as a lossy reduction of social complexity. Contingent power relations

are reframed as natural orders, and historically specific arrangements are presented as universal norms. Information that destabilizes this narrative is discarded, while elements that support stability are retained and moralized. Tradition stabilizes behavior by simplifying reality, not by accurately representing it. This is how tradition functions analogously to causal narratives that compress complex processes into linear explanations. Both provide intelligibility at the cost of fidelity.

Gender roles exemplify this obsession. Conservative accounts routinely portray gender norms as ancient, natural, and universal. Historical scholarship repeatedly demonstrates the falsity of these claims. Gender roles have varied dramatically across time, culture, and economic structure. What conservatism preserves is not an eternal truth about human nature, but a specific role compression optimized for labor extraction, inheritance control, and reproductive regulation. Gender is treated not as a flexible social arrangement, but as ontological infrastructure. Its rigidity is not accidental; it is necessary for the conservative project of ontological minimization.

As social and technological conditions evolve, this strategy becomes increasingly brittle. The modern world produces novelty at a pace that small ontologies cannot absorb. Advances in communication, medicine, mobility, and education expand human possibility faster than conservative symbolic systems can accommodate. Social contact increases variance and pluralism becomes unavoidable. Under these conditions, conservatism faces a structural dilemma. It can either expand its ontology, ceasing to be conservative in any meaningful sense, or intensify enforcement. Historically, it consistently chooses the latter.

This dynamic explains the persistent drift of conservative regimes toward authoritarianism. In the United States, rhetoric of small government coincided with the expansion of policing, mass incarceration, surveillance, and moral legislation. The carceral state grew precisely as welfare programs were dismantled. This was not hypocrisy, nor merely the result of racialized politics, though racial dynamics played a central role. It was the predictable outcome of a system attempting to preserve a restricted ontology in an environment of expanding possibility. Enforcement substituted for adaptation.

Populist leaders often serve as catalysts for this process, but they are not its origin. Populism is a surface phenomenon that exploits preexisting ontological exhaustion. As symbolic systems lose their capacity to integrate complexity, individuals experience pluralism as disorientation rather than opportunity. Populist movements promise relief by restoring clear boundaries, fixed identities, and moral binaries. They do not offer actual policy solutions; they offer ontological relief. Their appeal lies not in their competence, but in their capacity to reduce the complexity of the world.

Conservatism's authoritarian tendencies are neither accidental nor exceptional. They are inherent to a political orientation that prioritizes stability over adaptability, internal coherence over external correspondence, and simplicity over complexity. Conservatism is not immoral or unintelligent by necessity. It is structurally anti-adaptive by design. Its coherence is purchased by sacrificing its capacity to evolve. As reality continues to generate novelty, the gap between conservative ontology and lived experience widens. Friction increases, and rather than revising its design, conservatism attributes this friction to deviance, decadence, or external threat. Enforcement intensifies, and the cycle repeats.

The failure of conservatism is therefore not best understood as moral failure or a betrayal of ideals. It is a design failure revealed under changing conditions. Conservatism seeks to make reality small enough to govern by shrinking what is allowed to exist. The world, however, refuses to remain small. Human variation persists, new forms of life emerge, and complexity increases. Under these conditions, authoritarianism is not a pathology afflicting conservatism from without. It is the mechanism by which conservatism attempts, and ultimately fails, to preserve its ontological project.

The question is not why conservatism so often becomes authoritarian, but how it could do otherwise without abandoning its defining commitments. Any politics oriented toward ontological minimization cannot coexist with a reality characterized by expansion. As long as conservatism remains committed to making the world smaller by narrowing what counts as real, it will continue to require conformity, coercion, and moralization. Its authoritarian fetish is not a flaw in execution. It is the price of admission.

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